

Lent 3, March 12, 2023

JOHN 4:5–26. (EHV)

So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the piece of land Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there. Then Jesus, being tired from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone into town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." "Sir," she said, "you don't even have a bucket, and the well is deep. So where do you get this living water? You are not greater than our father Jacob, are you? He gave us this well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his animals." Jesus answered her, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I will give him will never be thirsty ever again. Rather, the water I will give him will become in him a spring of water, bubbling up to eternal life." "Sir, give me this water," the woman said to him, "so I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus told her, "Go, call your husband, and come back here." "I have no husband," the woman answered. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say, 'I have no husband.' In fact, you have had five husbands, and the man you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true." "Sir," the woman replied, "I see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews insist that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will not worship the Father on this mountain or in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know. We worship what we do know, because salvation is from the Jews. But a time is coming and now is here when the real worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for those are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (the one called Christ). "When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Jesus said to her, "I, the one speaking to you, am he."

What kind of worshiper are you?

Many today don't even ask themselves that question or think it's important. Forget, "What *kind* of worshiper are you?" In our age of increasing secularism, the more important question seems to be, "Are you a worshiper?" To many, it doesn't matter *how* you worship; it just matters *that* you worship. "At this point, I don't even care which church he goes to; I just want him to go to church," you'll hear people say. I once heard a person say in a conversation about religion, "There's no *wrong* church, right?" Or, to paraphrase, "There's no wrong *kind* of worshiper, right?"

You would hate it if someone were telling lies about you when you had shared clear information about yourself with them and were standing right there. *You* would hate it if someone were not following your instructions even though you had written them down as clearly as could be. Yet these days *God* is portrayed as someone who doesn't seem to mind either one.

But to say that there is no wrong kind of worship is to say that man writes the rules of worship, not God. To say that there's no right kind of worship is to say that man makes God, not the other way around.

Jesus tells us very clearly today that God is seeking a certain, definite kind of worshiper. Jesus tells us that, because he wants us to be the right kind of worshipers, the kind the Father seeks. The kind of worshiper the Father seeks is one who worships him in spirit, and one who worships him in truth.

1.

If you picture Judea in the south and Galilee in the north, Samaria was right smack dab in the middle. Jesus and his disciples had been in Judea and were heading to Galilee, and so they were passing right through the heart of Samaria.

They came to a village called Sychar, which was near Jacob's Well, and from which you could see Mount Gerizim to the south and Mount Ebal to the north. Imagine if there were a well where Golden Prairie is and just a small village where Highway 44 meets Highway 18, and there was one mountain where the city cemetery is and one mountain where the Leahy Bowl is, and you'll have an idea of Jesus's surroundings. These two mountains had religious significance for both the Jews and the Samaritans. Jacob had bought a plot of land near there before he moved down to Egypt during the famine. When the Israelites left slavery in Egypt they brought with them the bones of Joseph, Jacob's son. When they reached the Promised Land, they buried Joseph's bones at this plot. And Joseph's descendants, the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, inherited that land.

When God gave the Ten Commandments, he promised rich blessings to those who would keep them and grave curses to those who would not. He ordered some of the tribes to speak the blessings from Mount Gerizim, the imaginary Leahy Bowl mountain, and other tribes to speak the curses from Mount Ebal, the imaginary city cemetery mountain.

Eventually Mount Gerizim attained even more significance when the Israelites went into captivity in Babylon. Some Israelites were sent back to live with some of the foreigners who were now settling the land and to teach them how to worship the God of that land (as Nebuchadnezzar thought of it). Instead they intermarried and ended up worshipping many gods. But when they wanted to "worship" the God of Israel, they did so by offering sacrifices on Mount Gerizim instead of in Jerusalem.

Perhaps all this history was on Jesus's mind as he sat down by Jacob's Well at the sixth hour, probably six o'clock p.m. A Samaritan woman came out from Sychar to draw water at the well, so Jesus asked her for a drink. The woman initially refused. Her reason for refusing seems to have stemmed partially from her surprise that Jesus was even asking her for a drink in the first place, since he was a Jew and she was a Samaritan woman, and Jews and Samaritans did not get along. The Jews regarded the Samaritans as inferior, heretical halfbreeds, and the Samaritans regarded the Jews as uppity, self-righteous jerks. And there was both some truth and some ignorance on both sides. So the woman's reason for refusing also seems to have stemmed from a genuine prejudice against Jesus. He must have some ulterior motive; he must be trying to belittle her in some way by asking her to give him a drink.

In response, Jesus told her that the surprising thing wasn't that *he* had asked *her* for a drink, but that *she* had not asked *him*. She could only draw this water for temporary refreshment, whereas he could give her different water for eternal refreshment. The woman, perhaps laughing, said, "Well then, give me some of your water. It'll save me quite a few trips from my house to this well."

So Jesus told her, "Go and get your husband and come back." Suddenly the conversation was no longer amusing.

"I don't have a husband," she replied.

"I know you don't," Jesus said. "You've had *five* husbands, and you're currently enjoying physical relations with someone who is not your husband." And by the way, I used to think that Jesus was accusing her of living together with another unmarried man outside of marriage. But while the Bible does indeed make it clear elsewhere that that is also a sin (e.g. Hebrews 13:4), the emphasis in the Greek seems to be that the man she had was in fact a husband, but not *her* husband. The woman was not just fornicating, she was committing adultery.

Now the woman realizes that Jesus is a prophet. Perhaps in what follows she is trying to change the subject. If that's the case, I think we could understand why. If someone we didn't know told us the sinful things we had done and were doing, we might want to change the subject too. But perhaps she is simply realizing that at the heart of her sinful life is a faulty worship life, a worship life clouded by uncertainty and confusion. And if here stands a prophet who at least knows the truth about her sinful life, then perhaps he also knows the truth about the right kind of worship. So she essentially asks him, "Which is the right kind of worship?"

"Our fathers worshiped here on Mount Gerizim, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is on the temple mountain in Jerusalem. Which is right?"

She wasn't expecting the answer Jesus gave her. "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will not worship the Father on this mountain or in Jerusalem. . . . A time is coming and now is here when the real worshipers will worship the Father in spirit."

God had commanded that sacrifices be made at the temple in Jerusalem. But even in the Old Testament, God had made it clear that he wasn't primarily concerned with how many bulls were offered to him and that they were offered the right way. He was concerned that people were obeying his commands out of love for him, because they believed in his love for them. Sincere faith, not ritual, not location, was the most important thing.

Jesus is now telling this woman that the time was coming when sincere faith would still be the most important thing, but it would be even clearer that sincere faith was the most important thing, because God would not ask them to demonstrate that faith in any one location. They wouldn't have to make sacrifices on any mountain. They wouldn't have to pray toward any temple.

The purpose of the temple and the sacrifices was reaching its fulfillment. Jesus would be sacrificed once and for all on Mount Calvary. And his followers would then worship him not by actually coming to worship at one specific place, but by coming in faith to Calvary's holy mountain, by trusting in Jesus for forgiveness and life.

So in this context it is clear that worshipping God in spirit means that we put limited stock in external things when worshipping him. Especially now that Jesus has fulfilled the purpose of the temple and its worship regulations and sacrifices, especially now that he has

provided the ultimate sacrifice on the mountain on which Jerusalem was built, we should realize that whether we worship God in a house or a rented office suite or an A-frame church or a cruciform church or an octagonal church or what have you, that in itself doesn't make the worship better or worse.

Even today, when building a new church, churches are still traditionally built with the sanctuary facing east, that is, toward Jerusalem. But the worship rendered is in no way inferior if the people are facing north, south, or west; I wonder if this church was built facing west to make precisely that statement. And we can also pray when facing any direction. We can pray when we are walking, riding, or driving around facing all sorts of directions.

Worshipping God in spirit also means that we realize where our worship activity primarily and essentially takes place—in our hearts and minds. That means that even as we employ external things to aid in our spiritual worship, we need to keep those external things in their proper perspective, lest they take the place of true worship. That means that things like cross, altar, candles, pulpit, lectern, garments, paraments, flowers, artwork, and so on can all have their place and can and do serve a good purpose, but we could do without them and don't need to get bent out of shape about them. That also means that we shouldn't get the idea that simply showing up here every week on Sunday and putting our posterior in a pew in worship and in a chair in Bible Class is what makes us a Christian. In fact, no external work, as such, makes us a Christian and the right kind of worshiper.

Worship is a matter of our soul, spirit, and heart. If all of our religion is outside of us and we have no convictions on the inside, then we are not engaging in the right kind of worship. The right kind of worshipers worship God in spirit, even as he himself is spirit.

2.

But you can have all the conviction and sincerity in the world and still be the wrong kind of worshiper. The right kind of worshipers also worship God in truth. This concept is so foreign to many Americans. It's foreign to our sinful nature. If we're having a religious discussion with someone and they pull out the Well-that's-just-what-I-believe card, we feel we have to shut up. "Oh, that's your *faith*. Never mind then." We dissociate faith from facts, from the truth. That's because the idea that there is absolute truth is becoming less and less accepted. But this idea has always been a part of Christianity. That's why real Christians value being orthodox; that's a word that means "right teaching." The German word for orthodox is *rechtgläubig*, "correct believing." We get this idea from Christ himself: "But a time is coming and now is here when the real worshipers will worship the Father in spirit *and in truth*, for those are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and *in truth*."

Worshipping God in truth means first of all worshipping God in Christ. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). The apostle John wrote, "Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever does continue in that teaching has both the Father and the Son" (2 John 9). Jesus also says it here: Only the water he gives will become in us a spring bubbling up to eternal life. And at the end of the conversation, the Samaritan woman said, "I know that Messiah is coming" (the one called Christ). "When he comes, he will explain everything to us." And Jesus replied, "I, the one speaking to you, am he."

We must worship God in Christ, because only in Christ do we see ourselves for who we rightly are—utterly corrupt sinners by nature, deserving of eternal punishment. Especially during this Lent season, as we see Jesus suffering so horribly and punished in such cruel and inhumane ways, the only way his suffering makes sense is if we see what we ourselves deserved in that suffering.

We must worship God in Christ, because only in Christ do we see God for who he rightly is—a loving and compassionate God who would not have it that we simply die and get the eternal punishment we deserve. Only in Christ do we have the certainty of all of our sins forgiven, salvation accomplished, and life eternal.

This is where Jesus’s resurrection is especially vital. As I’ve said before, I would gladly believe everything Bill Nye the Science Guy said if he were to foretell that he was going to die for my sins and rise from the dead, and then did it. But he hasn’t, he won’t, and he can’t. Jesus could and he did. For most of you, several generations from now, if God allows the earth to continue that long, there will still be more documented historical evidence for Jesus’s resurrection from the dead than there will be that you even existed.

Worshipping God in truth also means teaching, studying, and believing everything else Christ has preserved for us in his Word. “Sanctify them by the truth,” Jesus prayed to God the Father, “your Word is truth” (John 17:17).

This means that when we want to worship and glorify God—and that should be every moment of our lives, not just here in corporate worship—then we don’t just make a decision and do as we please. That’s no better than the Samaritans’ worship on Mt. Gerizim. “You Samaritans worship what you do not know,” Jesus told the Samaritan woman. It means that we become more and more familiar with God’s word and seek more and more to conform our entire lives to it. That means that we do gather together regularly with other Christians in corporate worship, because God says that is his will for us (Hebrews 10:25). And for everything we do in worship, whether here or in our everyday lives, there ought to be scriptural grounds for it. We don’t just do things because they’re tradition or that’s the way we’ve always done them. We don’t just go to the church we go to because it’s the closest one or the one our parents went to. We worship as we do on the basis of the Scriptures. Only if God’s Word has no bearing on a decision are we free to do as we please, but even then we ask God’s blessing on it, and we seek to glorify Christ through it.

This woman had been the wrong kind of worshiper. But you know what happened to her after this conversation? Jesus’s word made her the right kind of worshiper. The woman left her water jar and went back into Sychar and told the people, “Come, see the man who told me everything I ever did.” That is, “Come, see the man who told me about all my sins.” She could say that now. She could confront her evil. She could stare it squarely in the eyes. Why? Because she was now the right kind of worshiper—one who worshiped God with soul, spirit, mind, and heart, and one who worshiped God in the truth of Jesus Christ. And the truth of Jesus Christ is this: Sin has been forgiven and righteousness is ours in him.

Be the right kind of worshiper, friends. Jesus invites you to be. Worship the Father in spirit. Worship the Father in truth. Those are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. Amen.